

## THE BASMALA

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

*bi-smi 'llāhi 'l-raḥmāni 'l-raḥīmi*

In the name of God,  
the Merciful, the Compassionate

### THE INTERPRETATION OF *BI-SMI* <sup>1</sup>

GOD, exalted is His mention, and sanctified are His Names, educated His Prophet, Muḥammad, teaching him to preface his actions with the mention of His Most Beautiful Names (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*), and commanded him to attribute them to Him before every important matter. He made what He had educated him to do, and what He had taught him, a normative precedent (*sunna*) to which all mankind were to conform, a path along which they were to follow him; and they were to commence their utterances, their letters, their writings, and their requests with it, in such a way that the explicit utterance of 'the formula' *bi-smi 'llāh* would even suffice to signify what the speaker implicitly intended to do, something which is left unsaid. That is to say, the preposition *bi-* in *bi-smi 'llāh* requires a verb to introduce it; but there is no explicit verb with it 'in the formula', so it is the hearer's knowledge of the intention of the person who says *bi-smi 'llāh* which enables him to do without the speaker having to announce explicitly what he intends. . . .

The purpose and intention behind the *basmala*

Hence it is understood, when someone says *bi-smi 'llāhi 'l-raḥmāni 'l-raḥīm* and then subsequently starts 'to recite' a sura, that his very following of the formula with the recitation itself imparts the signification of his saying *bi-smi 'llāhi 'l-raḥmāni 'l-raḥīm*, i.e., that his intention is: 'I recite in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.' Similarly, someone's saying *bi-smi 'llāh* when he starts

to get up or sit down, or do anything else, imparts the signification of his utterance, which is: 'I stand in the name of God', 'I sit down in the name of God', etc. [⇒ Ibn 'Abbās, 138]

OBJECTION: 'How can the interpretation of *bi-smi 'llāh* be as you say,<sup>1</sup> . . . when you know that everyone who recites the Book of God succeeds in doing so only with the help of God, and likewise with getting up, sitting down, and everything else? And, since this is the case, should one not also rather say *bi-'llāhi 'l-raḥmāni 'l-raḥīm* (=through God, the Merciful, the Compassionate), rather than *bi-smi 'llāh*? For the meaning would be clearer for the hearer if one were to say 'I stand up through God, the Merciful, the Compassionate', or 'I recite through God', than if one were to say ' . . . in the name of God', since this latter might lead him to suppose that one got up or sat down through something other than God', i.e., through the intermediary of His name?<sup>2</sup>

REPLY: The purpose behind this is not what you imagine. The meaning of *bi-smi 'llāh* is 'I begin by naming<sup>3</sup> God and invoking Him before anything else', or 'I recite with my naming God', or 'I stand up, or sit down, with my naming God and invoking Him.' One does not mean by *bi-smi 'llāh* 'I stand up through God', or 'I sit down through God.'

(...)

⇒ Ibn 'Abbās:

When first Gabriel was sent down to Muḥammad, he said: 'O Muḥammad, say: "I seek refuge from Satan, the stoned, in the All-hearing, the All-knowing."'<sup>4</sup> Then he said: 'Say: "*Bi-smi 'llāhi 'l-raḥmāni 'l-raḥīm*."' (...)' 'By this he meant:<sup>1</sup> 'O Muḥammad, recite with the invocation of God, your Lord. And stand and sit with the invocation of God.' [Ī39, see 137]

(...)

#### THE INTERPRETATION OF *ALLĀH* <sup>5</sup>

The interpretation of *Allāh* is, according to the meaning narrated to us from 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abbās: He is the One Whom everything takes as its god (*ya'lahu*), Whom all creatures worship (*ya'budu*).

⇒ Ibn 'Abbās:

Allāh is He Who possesses 'the attributes of' divinity (*al-ulūhīya*) and 'of' being worshipped (*al-ma'būdīya*) with respect to all His creatures. [141]

(..)

'There is no dispute among the Arabs that the verb *ta'allaha* exists and means 'to be worshipped',<sup>1</sup> and there is no doubt that 'this is the V<sup>th</sup> form of the possible I<sup>st</sup> form verb *alaha*<sup>1</sup> which, if it were employed, would mean 'to worship Allāh'.<sup>6</sup> ...

⇒ Ibn 'Abbās recited 'the variant reading of 7: 127<sup>1</sup>: «... *wa-yadhara-ka wa-ilāhata-ka* ...», 'the second half of' which he said 'meant the same as': ... '*ibādāta-ka* ... (= 'and leave you and' worship of you) 'instead of «... *wa-yadhara-ka wa-ālihata-ka* ...» (= «... and leave you and your gods»)<sup>1</sup>.<sup>7</sup> It is also said: 'He', Pharaoh,<sup>1</sup> was worshipped but did not worship.' [142 and 143; see also ⇒ Mujāhid, 144]

... What Ibn 'Abbās said shows that', if it existed, the verb<sup>1</sup> *alaha* would mean 'to worship', and that *ilāha* is the verbal noun derived from it.

(...)

Now the word *Allāh* in the Arabic language is originally from *ilāh*<sup>1</sup>, which is also derived from the possible verb *alaha*<sup>1</sup>. ... As in other cases of elision, the first letter of the noun, the *hamza* ('), 'together with its vowel *i*<sup>1</sup> drops out, and the letter *lām* (l), which is the second letter of the noun, contracts with the first *lām*, which is part of the definite article *al-*, and which carries no vowel, and they become a double *lām* (ll)<sup>1</sup>, and so *al-(i)lāh* becomes *Allāh*<sup>1</sup> ...

#### THE INTERPRETATION OF *AL-RAḤMĀNI* 'L-*RAḤĪMI*

Both *al-raḥmān* and *al-raḥīm* are derived nouns<sup>1</sup>, of the forms *fa'lān* and *fa'il* respectively,<sup>1</sup> from the verb *raḥima* (=to have mercy, to be compassionate), and they both have the sense of 'one who has mercy'. 'However, they do not have exactly the same meaning.<sup>1</sup> ...

[L]: Those who have expert knowledge of Arabic are agreed that the form of *al-raḥmān* denotes a stronger quality than the form of *al-raḥīm*.

...

## [T]: FIRST OPINION

⇒ Al-'Arzamī:

*Al-rahmān* 'denotes mercy' to all creatures, . . . and *al-rahīm* 'denotes mercy' to the believers. [146]

⇒ Abū Sa'īd 'al-Khudrī:

The Messenger of God said: 'Jesus, the son of Mary, said: "*Al-rahmān* is the Merciful in the next world as well as this world; *al-rahīm* is the Merciful in the next world.'" [147]

(...)

There is no reason to suppose that one of these interpretations is more correct than the other. . . . God, as *al-rahmān*, encompasses all His creatures in a general Mercy, whereas, as *al-rahīm*, He directs His specific Mercy towards some of His creatures, either in every state or only in some, either in this world or in the next or in both of them. . . . God, exalted is His praise, 'as *al-rahīm*' singles out His believing servants in this present world by the success He benevolently grants them for their obedience to Him, and their belief in Him and His Messenger, following His commands and avoiding disobedience. He withholds this success from those who attribute partners to Him, who disbelieve, who go against His commands and engage in disobedience. Moreover, God, exalted is His praise, bestows the abiding bliss and clear triumph which He has promised in the next world, in His Gardens, on those who entirely believe in Him, who hold His Messenger to be truthful, who act in obedience to Him, but not on those who attribute partners to, and disbelieve in, Him.

Clearly, God singles out the believers for His Mercy in this world and the next, just as He bestows favour and beneficence on both them and the unbelievers in this world in extending sustenance, providing 'rain-giving' clouds for their succour, bringing forth plants from the earth, 'giving them' healthy bodies and sound minds, and 'bestowing' other innumerable bounties in which the believers and the unbelievers share.

Our Lord, exalted is His praise, is *rahmān* towards all His creatures in both this and the next world, and He is *rahīm* specifically towards His believers in both this world and the next. He is *rahmān* in this world as we have just mentioned . . . 'and as He Himself said': «If you count God's blessing, you will never number it.» (14: 34 and 16: 18). . . . And 'He is *rahmān*' in the next world through His equal treatment for



all with His Justice and Judgement: He does not unjustly 'tip the scales' against a single one of 'His creatures', even by the weight of a speck of dust. . . . Each soul receives fully what it deserves. And we have already described that part of His Mercy for which He singles out the believers in this world, by which He is *raḥīm* to them in it, as He, exalted is His mention, says: «He is All-compassionate (*raḥīm*) to the believers» (33: 43). . . .

## SECOND OPINION

⇒Ibn 'Abbās:

*Al-raḥmān* is 'of the form' *al-fa'lān*, and it is from the speech of the Arabs. *Al-raḥmān al-raḥīm* 'means': The One Who feels compassion (*al-raḥīm*), the One Who treats gently (*al-raḥīm*) whoever He wishes to be Merciful towards, and Who is remote and stern towards whoever He wishes to be harsh with.' It is the same with all His Names. . . . [148]

This interpretation of Ibn 'Abbās indicates that 'the quality' by which our Lord is *raḥmān* is the same as that by which He is *raḥīm*, although there is a difference between 'the two nouns' as to the 'exact' sense 'of that quality'. For he takes *al-raḥmān* to mean 'the One Who is compassionate towards whoever He feels compassion (*raḥīm*) for', while he takes *al-raḥīm* to mean 'the One Who treats gently whoever He is kind with'.

This interpretation resembles the previous one . . . in that *al-raḥmān* has a different meaning and interpretation from *al-raḥīm*.

## THIRD OPINION

⇒'Aṭā' al-Khurāsānī:

'Originally' there was *al-raḥmān*, but when *al-raḥmān* was cut off from His name, it became *al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*. [149]

What 'Aṭā' meant by this, God willing, is: '*Al-raḥmān* was one of God's names by which none of His creatures had ever been called. When the liar Musailama<sup>8</sup> called himself by this name, thereby cutting it off from Him, i.e., cutting it off from His names and applying it to himself, God, exalted is His praise, let it be known that His name was *al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*; . . . for no one was called *al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*, using both names together, except Him, exalted is His mention.' . . . This is not an unsound opinion. . . .

FOURTH OPINION: Some ignorant people have claimed that the Arabs did not formerly know of the name *al-rahmān*, that it was not in their language, and that that is why the polytheists said to the Messenger: «What is the All-merciful (*al-rahmān*)? Shall we bow ourselves to what you bid us?» (25: 60) . . .

§ Ṭabarī says that this is an erroneous view. The question is asked rhetorically, and does not mean that they did not know of the name. He quotes pre-Islamic poetry as evidence that the name was known.

Also one interpreter who was weak in the science of interpretation claimed . . . that *al-rahmān* was used figuratively to mean 'He Who possesses Mercy (*dhu 'l-rahma*)', and that *al-rahīm* was used figuratively to mean 'He Who dispenses Mercy (*al-rāḥim*)' . . .

§ Ṭabarī says that there is no basis for this opinion.



WHEN the Arabs want to speak about something, they are used to mentioning its name first, then following it with its attributes and qualities. . . . Now God, exalted is His mention, has names by which none of His creatures may be called, which He reserves for Himself alone and not for them, like Allāh, *al-rahmān*, *al-khāliq* (=the Creator). He also has names which He allowed people to call each other by, such as *al-rahīm*, *al-samīʿ* (=one who hears), *al-baṣīr* (=one who sees), *al-karīm* (=one who is generous), etc. Therefore it is necessary that those names which belong to Him and to none of His creatures be mentioned first, so that the hearer may know to whom he is directing praise and glorification; then should follow the names by which others are also called. . . . God, exalted is His mention, begins by His name Allāh, because none but He has divinity (*ulūhīya*)<sup>9</sup> in any sense at all. . . .

Now 'God' speaks of Himself specifically as *al-rahmān*: «Say: 'Call upon Allāh, or call upon *al-rahmān*; whichever you call upon, to Him belong the Names Most Beautiful'» (17: 110), and He has forbidden any of His creatures to be so called, even though there are some among His creatures who deserve to be named with some of its meanings. . . . Therefore *al-rahmān* comes second to His name Allāh. However, as for His name *al-rahīm*, we have already said that it is permissible to describe someone other than Him by it. . . . This is why

His name Allāh comes before His name *al-raḥmān*, and His name *al-raḥīm* before His name *al-raḥīm*.

Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī held the same opinion as we do concerning *al-raḥmān*<sup>1</sup>, namely<sup>1</sup>, that it is one of God's names by which none of His servants may be called.

⇒ Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī:

*Al-raḥmān* is a forbidden name (*ism mamnū'*). [150]

Moreover, the community unanimously agrees that no one can be called by 'this name', which makes it unnecessary to quote al-Ḥasan's, or anyone else's, opinion about this as evidence of the correctness of what we say.

<sup>1</sup> *Bi-smi* is formed from two words: the particle *bi-*, signifying 'with', etc., and the noun *ism*, signifying 'name'. The initial 'i' of *ism* is dropped and the two words are joined.

<sup>2</sup> This would infringe the dogma of God's oneness (*tawḥīd*) by implying that an act was accomplished not by God but by His name. God alone is the ultimate agent of all acts.

<sup>3</sup> Ṭabarī justifies his reading the substantive, viz., *ism* (= name), as a verbal noun, viz., *tasmīya* (= naming), on the grounds that such an equivalence accords in general with the linguistic practice of the Arabs.

<sup>4</sup> See *Intro.*, pp. 46-7.

<sup>5</sup> The name Allāh occurs 2,696 times in the Qur'ān.

<sup>6</sup> Arabic philology has traditionally sought to derive the meanings of all words from their structure, and to this end the root is taken as the basis for verbs, and the verb for nouns. It is sometimes necessary, as in this case, to supply a 'non-existent' verb, i.e., one whose form follows the morphological rules of Arabic grammar but which is not used in the language, in order to derive the semantic content of a noun from its root. For further details, see *Trans. Intro.*, pp. xxxii-xxxiv.

<sup>7</sup> The full verse reads: «Then said the Council of Pharaoh: 'Will you leave Moses and his people to work corruption in the land, and leave you and your gods?'»

<sup>8</sup> See *Intro.*, n. 14.

<sup>9</sup> In terms of Ṭabarī's interpretation of *ilāha* as 'worship', *ulūhīya* should here be thought of as signifying the property of being worshipped.